

COULD SWITZERLAND SET AN EXAMPLE?

by Jean Bénédict

Whereas Anglo-Saxon Masonry is on the decline, the European tendency, and especially in francophone Switzerland, is rather encouraging. There are reasons for this. It can easily be verified by a rapid survey of the Masonic movement in this small country. May this modest study bring some insights to students of Masonry eager to help it recover its past glory.

Switzerland in a nutshell

Lying in the middle of Europe, fiercely independent, politically and militarily neutral, still indifferent to the overwhelming pressure of the European Community, Switzerland is one of the smallest countries in the world (just over 7 million residents), yet exerts an influence completely disproportionate to its size in many fields: banking, scientific research, tourism, watchmaking, jewellery, fine arts, literature, music, mountaineering, etc. It is both hampered and enriched by the coexistence of three national languages and cultures (German, French, Italian, in that order). Another particularity: the country (founded in 1491 but only 'incorporated' as a federal entity—a Confederation—since 1848) is made up of independent states, much like the USA.

A short history

The first lodge, opened in 1736 in Geneva, was rapidly shut down by fearful local authorities. Another one sprang up in Lausanne in 1740 under English pressure. Three other lodges followed, until the Bern government closed them down in 1745 under state law. This law was revoked in 1776.

Basel was the first city in Switzerland to witness the invasion, in 1768, of the Strict Observance movement, later to become the Rectified Scottish Rite. Thereafter, the Masonic community swayed to and fro in a continuous battle of influence between French and German forces.

The neighbouring French Revolution (1789) brought further strife: the Masonic movement was outlawed in the whole territory of Switzerland between 1793 and 1803. Yet some lodges managed to survive; from 1822 onwards, the project for a national jurisdiction took shape, succeeding in 1848—the same year as the creation of the modern Swiss Confederation. The new jurisdiction gradually modified its title over the years and adopted its definitive name in 1913, Swiss Alpina Grand Lodge (SAGL).

A Supreme Council was constituted in 1875. From then on, the Obedience thrived, except during the two World Wars, and during a sombre interlude almost comparable to the Morgan Affair of 1826–1836 in America. Under the influence of the Fascist rise in Italy (Mussolini) and Germany (Hitler), an anti-Masonic wave sprang up in 1922 in Geneva. All Swiss Masonry mobilised in self-protection, as political pressure increased. Switzerland was to become the only country in the world to conduct a national referendum in such matters, which luckily ended by a sweeping favourable vote.

The ups and downs of international relationships

In 1902 the SAGL created an International Bureau of Masonic Relations, renamed in 1921 the International Masonic Association (AMI). The Bureau loosely bound as many as 28 jurisdictions worldwide. The AMI subsisted until 1950. Under impulsion by the Esperantist movement, another group (mixed) had more luck; the Universal Masonic League (LUF) was created in Geneva in 1905 and is still thriving in some 12 countries.

For a short time (1896–1906), another mixed movement named *Droit Humain* (DH) sprang up. Finally the DH jurisdiction under French control established mixed lodges in Switzerland from 1913 on. The first exclusively feminine lodge was created only in 1964.

The national scene thus changed gradually under much pressure for more independence from British influence. The shock of the United Grand Lodge of England's (UGLE's) 1929 'Basic Principles for Grand Lodge Recognition' put the SAGL in a lather. Twenty years later, SAGL issued its own set of principles, the Five Points of Winterthur. In turn, the severity of these prompted the Grand Orient of France (GODF) to install a lodge of its own in Lausanne in 1955, which caused the SAGL to cease its relations immediately with the Grand Orient. Three years later, with three GODF lodges established in the meantime, a Grand Orient of Switzerland was constituted. Since the ties between the two largest French jurisdictions were so close, in 1958 recognition was also withdrawn from the Grand Lodge of France (GLdF).

The events of 1955 and 1958 caused much dissatisfaction among the members of SAGL. In 1971 the English Board of General Purposes even cut off recognition of the mainstream SAGL for several months. The abyssal void—for a total of 32 years—created by interruption of all relations with France, a unique situation among nations—became unbearable. The SAGL continued to maintain fruitful relationships with all the other mainstream jurisdictions of Europe, but the closest territory of all, France, lay waste until at long last the SAGL recognised the French National Grand Lodge (GLNF) in 1990. Under such a climate of fear, recognition of the Grand Lodge of Belgium had also been withdrawn in 1983, in favour of the then tiny new-born Regular Grand Lodge of Belgium. It was felt that another *faux pas* would mean a final exclusion. This unease has long bedevilled relationship with UGLE, although SAGL works in perfect regularity. Luckily, in the last few years, this anxiety has much abated.

The birth of a multi-constitutional scene

The accompanying appendix reveals a picture which can be compared, for instance, with the French situation which currently counts 13 different jurisdictions, only one of which is mainstream, the GLNF.

It is to be noted that the split-off with the Grand Orient of Switzerland could well have been avoided, had it not been for the uncompromising attitude of UGLE's Board of General Purposes at the time. Since then it is universally known how the Board finally accepted the perfectly legitimate Prince Hall Grand Lodges. As of May 2004, they have been recognised by 37 out of 51 American mainstream jurisdictions. Other signs of a better understanding noted recently are encouraging.

Nevertheless, the idea of different coexisting entities seems to be gaining weight. Is it really necessary to put all of Masonry under one hat? Just as the outer world is getting ever more uniform and globalised, Masonry has a legitimate counter-weight claim to individualism in the form of decentralised organisations, ready to adapt to changing conditions.

Mainstream Masonry today

Masonic membership suffered a severe cutback during the Fascist turmoil (1920–1945). About half of the members deserted under the intense pressure of public opinion. The end of the War did not bring about significant change. Thus membership has remained relatively stable, if not in slight decline in the last thirty years. However, the number of lodges has increased considerably, thus reducing the average membership in each one:

Year	Total Members	Lodges	Average per lodge
1900	3800	32	119
1970	3800	51	75
2005	3550	79	45

To be perfectly accurate, the above comparisons should incorporate the relatively recent creation of new jurisdictions. The average then lowers to 35 members per lodge. Aside from some very small skirmishes, co-existence with these jurisdictions is normal: peaceful and devoid of conflict.

The lesson to be learned is clear: sound quality of initiation occurs preferably in smaller gatherings; huge lodges dilute personal responsibility and tend to crumble under the effect of absenteeism. In other words, quantity is not a guarantee of quality and 'small is beautiful'!

As of early 2005, the SAGL enjoys an excellent reputation and recognises 164 Masonic bodies worldwide. It is in a position to open up more widely, but this takes time: *chi va piano va sano*.

Diversity of rituals

As for the rituals in use, there is great diversity, owing to language, geography, and political changes wrought over the years. Only four lodges presently work Emulation ritual. The others have different variations of Scottish (AASR), Rectified, Schroeder, Modern French, etc. Respectful of these differences in tradition, the SAGL does not interfere with the will of the lodges, other than to see to it that its Constitution texts are duly respected. The philosophy of a Swiss Confederation obeying democratic rules is very strongly embedded in national customs.

Ritual is, with the exception of the Emulation lodges, not learned by heart, but almost all read from printed rituals. Great diversity exists in the use of live or recorded music, songs, physical impediments during the voyages, and so forth.

Working practices

Unlike Anglo-Saxon and especially American habits, what we call Continental Masonry is very strict on promotion requirements. Each step of initiation always involves only one candidate, except for the second degree, and at least a year of preparation. Accepted Apprentices and Fellow Crafts must present a well-constructed 'piece of architecture' on different aspects of Masonry: symbolism, history, philosophy, psychology, etc, to be read in Assembly. Visits to other lodges are highly recommended. Knowledge of the catechism in each degree is required. So are the main elements of the Statutes and by-laws of the home lodge and of the Jurisdiction. Reading good Masonic literature receives particular attention. The higher degrees have similar requirements.

Such practices prevail in most European lodges. They call for a real effort in some kind of research, and they encourage the candidates to go well beyond the simple assimilation of rituals. Each step in progression bides its time, no rush is ever tolerated. These methods ensure solid knowledge and dedication.

There is no point here in depreciating the traditional oral system inherited from the ancients. Its value has been widely confirmed by generations of sincerely adhering officers. One discovers something magical in the spectacular smoothness of the ritual's unfolding. Yet it has enormous drawbacks:

- Initially, the rituals were very short and could be learned quickly.
- Today they are long and intricate, needing many hours of repetition and rehearsals to be fully assimilated.
- Modern culture is refractory to rote learning, first at school, even more so in later life.
- The intense effort of memorising absorbs much time and energy, which could be better invested in deepening the vast richness of symbolism in its philosophical, psychological and sociological facets.
- Expertise of the ritual at all its levels and circumstances turns into a mechanism of self-conservation of inherited structures, thereby cutting short any tendency for development and change, spontaneity and imagination.
- Someone has said that tradition has to be re-invented at every generation. Otherwise it is condemned to immobility!

Conclusion

The dramatic loss of membership in Anglo-Saxon Masonry has many origins. Social change, competition by numerous Service Clubs, the passion of the TV and Web generations for immediate satisfaction, and other causes can partly explain the phenomenon. But certainly many new members—those of weak memory—shy away from the tremendous effort of learning by rote. Laziness has set in on a universal scale, for all to see.

Speculative Masonry at its outset offered ambitious new social and philosophical innovations in a world that badly needed more justice and democracy. Elitism through fraternisation with the nobility also had its share. These tenets have since disappeared in modern democracies or are absorbed by pressure groups (political parties, unions, lobbies, nongovernmental organisations). Masonry, whose skeleton essentially remained as it was, has been robbed of its flesh and blood. Introspection, self-analysis, and social gatherings are all that remain to sustain the Masonic idea. If this skeleton is not animated by substantial flesh, it will wither and wane. Even Continental Masonry is doomed to the same fatality in the long run.

Numerous experiments conducted in the USA of late, destined to stem the downward trend, such as one-day classes, multiplication of social events with family participation, rapid advancement and the like, have failed badly. Charitable activities, a traditionally important part of the Masonic message, are not exclusive to the Craft and weigh far too little to save the system.

Suffice it to look back to primitive operative practices: intense emotional participation; initiation with in-depth research for the Unknown, accompanied by an intellectual and spiritual research activity. Alongside these, a severe selection of candidates is absolutely essential. These are some keys to a re-birth of Masonry in the third Millennium. There is no alternative. The long climb lies ahead.

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GMs and/or Chancellors of all six Swiss jurisdictions and GSec of the GL of California.

Appendix

Swiss jurisdictions

Swiss Alpina Grand Lodge (SAGL)

First regular jurisdiction, created in 1844.

Status : 79 Lodges, 3550 masc. members.

Official HQ: 17 Ave. de Beaulieu, 1004 Lausanne.

Website: <www.freemasonry.ch>

E-mail: <glsa@planet.ch>

Grand Orient of Switzerland (GOS)

Split off from SAGL in 1958.

Status: 20 Lodges, 400 masc. members.

Official HQ: P.O. Box 94, 1073 Savigny.

Website: <www.g-o-s.ch>

E-mail: <contact@g-o-s.ch>

Swiss Federation of Droit Humain (DH: Human Rights Co-Masonry)

Created in 1913.

Status: 5 Lodges, 150 masc. and fem. members.

Official HQ:

Website:

E-mail: <cag23@wanadoo.fr>

Mixed Grand Lodge of Switzerland

Split off from DH 1999 by 7 Lodges.

Status: 9 Lodges, 200 masc. and fem. members.

Official HQ: Lausanne.

Website: <www.masonic.ch>

E-mail: <flschmidt@scopus.ch>

Women's Grand Lodge of Switzerland

Created in 1976.

Status: 18 Lodges, 330 fem. members.

Official HQ:

Website: <www.glfs-masonic.ch>

E-mail: <glfs@glfs-masonic.ch>

Great Symbolic Lodge of Helvetia – Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis-Misraïm

Created in 1960.

Status: 7 Lodges, 110 masc. and fem. members.

Official HQ: Geneva.

Website: <www.glsh.org>

E-mail: <contact@glsh.org>

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